

ARTICLE 17, PENAL
ON PAGE 34 (PART I)

LOS ANGELES TIMES
20 October 1985

Marion, Ill., Facility Is 'the New Alcatraz'

Rights Groups Target Toughest Prison

By SAMUEL O. HANCOCK, *United Press International*

MARION, Ill.—It is called "the New Alcatraz," "the House of Pain," and "the end of the line."

By any name or measure, the federal penitentiary at Marion is the toughest prison in the federal system.

It is the only correctional institution of the 45 in the federal system with a security classification of Level 6. That means it gets the most unmanageable inmates in the entire federal system.

Marion has also become the focus of national attention by prisoners' rights groups, the courts and Congress.

In his soft Georgia drawl, Warden Jerry Williford explains that complaints by prisoners got him into the corrections field as a caseworker at Atlanta after he graduated from Georgia State. Now, two decades later, Williford is hearing plenty of prisoner complaints.

Williford, 42, who had served as executive assistant to the Marion warden in 1977, came back as warden on April 17, 1984. He stepped into a hotbed of controversy stemming from a lockdown imposed at the prison on Oct. 27, 1983, after two guards and an inmate were stabbed to death within five days.

U.S. Magistrate Kenneth J. Meyers, who held hearings on a request

by inmates for a preliminary injunction against the lockdown, said in a report on Aug. 2 that the lockdown was necessary.

The federal Bureau of Prisons says the maximum security side of Marion houses about 340 of the most disruptive, assaultive and escape-prone inmates of the 34,000 in federal prisons. About one-third of the prisoners at Marion were convicted of crimes in states, and are boarded under contract with the federal government.

Marion's K Unit, sometimes called the "Director's Unit" because Bureau of Prisons Director Norman Carlson decides who goes in and who comes out, has a handful of high-profile inmates.

They include white supremacist Joseph Franklin; former CIA agent Edwin Wilson; Jack Abbott, whose letters author Norman Mailer turned into the prison life book "In the Belly of the Beast"; spy Christopher Boyce, the "Falcon" in the movie "The Falcon and The Snowman"; jet hijacker and escape artist Garrett Brock Trapnell, and Michael Thevis, known as the "Porno King."

Gary Gilmore was quartered at Marion as a state prisoner from Oregon until he was released on parole in April, 1976, and less than a year later Gilmore was executed by a firing squad at Utah State

Prison for murdering a hotel clerk early in his parole.

Most Marion inmates, serving an average sentence of 40½ years, spend 22½ hours a day in their cells under the lockdown. The prison is rimmed by eight guard towers and double chain-link fences with coil upon coil of razor wire atop and between them.

"Marion has realized its mission to replace Alcatraz and houses a much more hard-core offender than it did back in 1977," Williford said. "It was basically an open institution at that time."

In contrast, across a blacktop road to the west is the unfenced Level 1 minimum-security Marion Prison Camp, where 180 inmates serve average sentences of 2.5 years for nonviolent offenses. They include bankers, doctors and lawyers who live in dormitories and have access to a baseball diamond, gymnasium, tennis courts and garden plots.

Marion, in southern Illinois 320 miles south of Chicago, opened as a prison camp in 1963, the same year Alcatraz closed, and gained full prison status the next year.

It did not become "the New Alcatraz" until 1979 when it received the Level 6 classification. Between 1962 and 1979, unmanageable prisoners were spread among it and other institutions.